

I

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Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea.

~ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

I heard them long before I saw them. Their sound was faint at first, just a few far notes skimming like stones over water. Then the songs strengthened and rose, spiralling clear above the wind as I walked, a summer lament riding in on the river. I followed the curve of the coast until I reached the barnacled shell of the *Hans Egede*, slumped in a slick sweep of mud on the foreshore of the Thames. Built in Denmark in 1922, all that remained of the once three-masted ship was its exposed and broken hull. It could have been a beached sea creature the way its wooden ribs lay splayed on the shore at low tide, bedraggled and tinted green by seaweed. When I heard the sharp sea-whistling of the oystercatchers again, close by and clear this time, I saw that a pair of them had seemingly divided the wreck in two. They balanced the boat as crisply as a reflection – one at the bow, the other at the stern – in the same way that the *Hans Egede* was weighted equally between land and sea, forever beached at a crossroads, on a peninsula where the river meets the sea.

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The Hoo Peninsula is a rich weave of water and earth at the edge of the Thames Estuary, taking its name from a word meaning ‘spur’ in Old English, jutting, as it does, into the widening waters like the prow of that beached boat. It’s bordered by two rivers, the Thames to the north and the Medway to the south, and has been preserved from the sweeping tides by a sea wall that protects its lowest and most vulnerable edges. The peninsula is a mosaic of landscapes and characteristic features, a mingle of intertidal mudflats, grazing marsh, thirteenth-century flint churches, pockets of threatened woodland where rare nightingales still thrive, centuries-old villages, orchards and agricultural fields in one of Britain’s warmest microclimates, as well as shingle beaches, dykes, lagoons, saltings that were dug by hand for their clay, and saline creeks known locally as fleets. It’s a place where a set of complex habitats, both human and wild, are woven into one.

But wherever you go, water is at the heart of the Hoo. It lifts boats from the riverbed with the rising tide, seeps up creeks like slowly moving mists and fills deceptively deep hollows with quickening mud, the entire landscape still under the jurisdiction of the sea, just as it’s always been. Overlooking the marshes from St Helen’s in the village of Cliffe, the churchyard’s poignant charnel house is a reminder of that long maritime history and the intrinsic relationship that lends this place its unique character. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, the charnel house is a rare Victorian mortuary, one of only a few still to be found in Kent. Set in the corner of the churchyard nearest the marshes, at first glance the small building appears to be a chapel adjacent to the main place of worship. But as you move closer, drawn by a combination of exquisite stonework, the arched, wood-battened doors and the view over the marshes that unfolds as you near, you’ll notice that the ‘lantern’

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atop the sharply pitched roof is inset with angled slats that act as vents, allowing odours from inside to escape. Restored in 2008, this Grade II listed building was still in use up to the beginning of the twentieth century to store bodies until they could be identified and buried. Victims of drowning were often caught in a particular net of currents in the Thames that beached them on the rim of the peninsula; once pulled from the river, their bodies were carried or carted across the marshes and temporarily laid to rest inside the charnel house on a raised slab called the dais, kept cool by that stone pediment to slow the process of decomposition until the arrival of the undertakers. This watery, peninsular world has long been defined by its wild and shifting edges.

It's these same wild edges that have made the Thames Estuary home to such a spectacular array of birds. Over 300,000 of them winter there, arriving in autumn from breeding grounds as far north as the Arctic to feed from the extensive mudflats and salt marshes that are restocked daily by the tides. The estuary entertains spectacular rafts of wildfowl and aerial shoals of grey plover, knot and dunlin that twist and turn over the water like spools of ribbon unravelling in the wind. In recognition of this avian richness, holding globally significant numbers of wintering water birds alongside a diverse collection of marshland plants and rare invertebrates, as well as carrying out such essential hydrological functions as flood-water storage and shoreline stabilization, the Thames and Medway estuaries and marshes have been designated as Wetlands of International Importance, in accordance with the Ramsar Convention for the conservation and sustainable use of wetland ecosystems. Slotted between the two estuaries, the Hoo Peninsula is compelling in its own right: it supports significant breeding populations of avocets, lapwings, shelducks and oystercatchers; it's

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sleeved by protected land in the form of ecologically valuable marshes on both the Thames and Medway sides of the spur; it hosts one of the RSPB's oldest nature reserves, founded in 1955 at Northward Hill; and is home to England's largest heronry, where around 150 pairs of grey herons have colonized a stand of mature oaks. As a result of its notable habitats and the presence of these significant species, much of the wider landscape, both onshore and offshore, is covered by one protective measure or another, whether Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – the basic building blocks of site-based conservation in the UK – Special Protection Areas (SPA) under the EU's Birds and Habitats Directives, or nature reserves, alongside the Ramsar wetland listing.

Taken together, the Hoo Peninsula and its estuarine surroundings have been accorded the highest level of protection in the UK, shy of being designated a national park. Despite this, and the unique rural character of its historic countryside and communities, the place has been under tremendous threat. I stood amidst slanting snow, peering out through a mire of Easter weather while Joan Darwell, a local parish councillor from the village of Cliffe, did her best to speak above the whistling wind: 'If someone came along and said, *We're going to build an airport on the New Forest*, people would be absolutely outraged. But they can here, because this area is so little known for its importance.' Together we looked out over the marshes, faint in the mist, as a skein of geese smudged the sky. The unspoken question that hung heavy in the air was this: how meaningful are these protective measures any more? Proposals to develop such protected places as Lodge Hill in Kent, Rampisham Down in Dorset and the Gwent Levels of South Wales have made clear – just as Donald Trump unwittingly did in 2008 when he convinced the Scottish government to ignore the

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SSSI designation of a rare strand of shifting sand dunes, the fifth-largest dune system in all of Britain, so that he could build a luxury golf course in an area recognized for its unique ecological and scenic importance – that protection means little without the intention to honour it, without the desire to value a place for what it already is.

Our economic system has repeatedly emboldened politicians to override protective measures in the name of supposed national interest, as though only fiscal growth was of significance to the citizenry. Valuable natural environments that support and nourish us in additional ways to economic wellbeing have frequently been deemed expendable, to the point that ‘protected’ has become almost meaningless as a term, a word that’s no longer absolute in definition but entirely flexible, reshaped as needed to suit the political whims of the day. Language is clearly part of the problem. In an article in 2017, the author and environmental journalist George Monbiot considered the relationship between words and wonder, noting that language ‘possesses a remarkable power to shape our perception’. Condemning such terms as ‘Sites of Special Scientific Interest’, ‘no-catch zones’, ‘reference areas’ and ‘natural capital’ for a lack of vision when describing the remarkable vitality and richness of the planet we inhabit, he went on to write, ‘Had you set out to estrange people from the living world, you could scarcely have done better.’ The terminology of protective designations does little to inspire the engagement and enthusiasm of the wider public in challenging such political decisions, lacking the vibrant potency and compelling qualities that those places themselves possess in admirable abundance. And the lack of a suitable language twines with a second issue of concern – that of invisibility. Certain landscapes, and here I’m thinking particularly of marshlands in

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light of the Hoo Peninsula, have long lacked the cultural affirmation of downs, dales and lochs in the national imagination. For many, marshes conjure an atmosphere of dank desolation, a stretch of inhospitable flatlands rife with malaria and malignancy. These are places that have largely been omitted from the map of aesthetic attention – anonymous, barren and seemingly disposable, even when the cultural stereotype bears no resemblance to the dynamic and impressive actuality of the landscape. Without knowledge of such places, and all the beauty, wonder, heritage and meaning they contain, it's difficult to care about them. And without care, they're nearly impossible to preserve.

At a travel specialist's in London, I went in search of a map of the Hoo Peninsula. The assistant stared blankly at me for a moment, before asking, 'So where's that then?' It turned out to be a prescient question. I might have had better success in the shop if I'd asked for something on a remote Himalayan trekking route, as, over the following months, I discovered that this remarkable English peninsula, only thirty miles as the egret flies from where we stood in the shop that afternoon, occupied an essentially empty place in the minds of many people. So few that I spoke to had ever heard of it, or if they had, they knew very little about its landscape. It was as new to them as it was to me. 'I pass by on the train to the Kent coast sometimes,' a friend had said to me. 'There's nothing there, it's just marshes.' Even before I'd reached it, it had begun to feel as if the peninsula implied absence rather than presence.

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George Crozer met me at a nearby railway station. In his late fifties, George was tall and reed-like, with wavy white hair and a

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moustache, and he spoke with the warm drawl of the Kentish coast. His easy style of conversation and personal engagement were most probably honed by working as the manager of his son's wedding band, the white van we travelled in through the billow of Easter snow no doubt doubling up as transport for their equipment. And as soon as we'd set off, George got to the core of the matter.

'You've got this magical place that's the North Kent Marshes and nobody knows about it. Nobody's celebrating it. And we should be. We should be putting this in the hearts and minds of people.' I asked George if he'd always been interested in wildlife and nature. 'Not at all,' he replied. 'All the years I'd lived here and I never even went to the RSPB reserve down the road from me.' I then asked him if there was a particular experience that had changed him. 'It was the first year that two egrets came back,' he said, 'and I went to Cliffe pools and saw this mating dance of theirs. And for me it was like being in Africa on the Serengeti. Just this kind of seminal moment.' His words reminded me how quickly place, and our experiences within it, can alter our perceptions in much the same way as language can shape our understanding of wonder and the natural world. 'The pools back then were still surrounded by dumped cars and stuff like that, but you could see through it for something like those birds.'

We drove to the village of Cliffe to meet up with Gill Moore and Joan. All three of them were parish councillors for the Hoo Peninsula, and loyal to the place they called home. As founders of the Friends of the North Kent Marshes, this wasn't the first time they'd been trying to raise awareness about this unsung part of southern England. In 2001 a Department of Transport study identified Cliffe as the potential site for a new four-runway airport.

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Without the context of a corresponding landscape it's difficult to get a sense of scale when trying to visualize such plans, but there's a helpful viewpoint at the RSPB reserve at Northward Hill that takes in the sweeping vista of a portion of the Hoo Peninsula's marshes. From there I'd watched a marsh harrier wheel over the wetlands through falling snow one afternoon, before looking down at the long interpretive panel beside the path. It was similar to those boards you see in any number of cities, a panoramic guide to the skyline, denoting the names of each church, museum and historic building as you scan the urban landscape ahead of you. Only this panel was a guide to the marshes, bordered by photographs of some of its charismatic residents, including the nightingale, little egret and hobby. The panorama covered a vast area, highlighting sites of particular interest within the open country, such as Egypt Bay, where prison hulks were anchored in Victorian times, a nineteenth-century shepherds' hut, a flourishing old cherry orchard and a former marshland pub with a reputation for harbouring smugglers in times past.

While reading the descriptions I noticed a distinct red line across the entire illustration. It was drawn at the edge of the Thames, far off in the distance when I lifted my eyes from the board and peered through the mist and snow. I returned to the panel, still unsure what that sharp red line denoted after finding nothing at all that I could connect it to in the landscape, eventually discovering the explanation in a small box of text:

All the land from here out to the red line, plus that stretching several miles further round to your right, would have disappeared under the tarmac of Cliffe Airport had the plan been given the go-ahead. Northward Hill would have been bulldozed flat

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and the earth built up on the marshes in a layer 50 feet thick. Aggressive bird deterrent measures would have been brought in all around the airport to scare off the thousands of protected birds that would have posed such a huge risk of airstrike. The magnificent ‘No Airport at Cliffe’ campaign, which united community and conservation in the fight against the airport, saw the option rejected, hopefully for good, in December 2003.

I paused near the end: *hopefully for good*. A decade on from the Cliffe Airport campaign and the Friends of the North Kent Marshes were engaged in another fight on behalf of their home ground. ‘We set up Friends of the North Kent Marshes because we could see there would be other threats coming along, whether it was airports or whatever else,’ said Gill, ‘because to some people it looks like a big empty space with nothing in it, but for us, it’s a really important place filled with wildlife and lovely, wonderful communities, and we wanted to protect them.’ She’d appealed to the critical difference between ‘space’ and ‘place’ – one a malleable territory largely devoid of culturally recognized characteristics, and therefore perceived as ideal for developing, the other a landscape of attachment, or Alan Gussow’s ‘piece of a whole environment that has been claimed by feelings’. Although the Cliffe Airport plan was quashed in 2003 on largely economic grounds, the three parish councillors were absolutely right about other threats looming over their landscape. The idea of an estuary airport hadn’t gone away. In 2008 the possibility of one was revived when Boris Johnson, London’s mayor at the time, called for a feasibility study to be carried out for a floating airport near Shivering Sands, off the Isle of Sheppey. And by the time the Airports Commission, headed by financial-markets expert Sir

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Howard Davies, had begun considering options for increased aviation capacity in the south-east of England in 2013, Johnson, along with promoting a proposal for a floating airfield in the estuary, which became known as ‘Boris Island’, was avidly backing architect Sir Norman Foster’s plan to build Europe’s largest airport on the Hoo Peninsula as his preferred choice.

Gill, Joan and George have been tireless in telling the stories of this place, occasionally to the detriment of other aspects of their lives. ‘The campaign,’ said Joan, ‘and all the time we have given to it, has hurt us sometimes with our families and our jobs, but we couldn’t just turn away.’ Ever since the airport proposal became known, they’ve galvanized their energies to raise awareness about what it would mean for both human and natural communities, persistently canvassing local opinion and setting up stalls at gatherings where they could spread the word about the threat, from Rochester’s Dickens Festival to local village fairs. They’ve regularly travelled alongside local politicians to governmental summits and public consultations, taking a piece of this historic place with them each time, arguing in its defence and attempting to show how misguided the plan is, given what’s at stake, highlighting the environmental protections purportedly shielding the North Kent Marshes from rampant development. Ultimately they’ve tried to reveal the extraordinary presence of this place rather than allow it to be defined by others, unveiling the remarkable blend of culture, nature and community that’s been knitted together there over centuries. They’ve made clear what will disappear from the world.

‘People don’t realize the size and scale of it,’ said Joan, endeavouring to conjure the airport over the misted marshes. If built, it would be a four-runway international hub, costing the public

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purse up to £123 billion, with sufficient flight capacity for 110 million passengers per year upon completion, a figure that could rise to 150 million through later expansion. To put that into context, Heathrow's passenger numbers for 2017 were just under 78 million. An airport platform that could host 140 flight movements per hour, descending and departing primarily over the bird-teeming estuary, would be partially built into the Thames itself, and would be 3.25 miles long and 2.8 miles wide. It would be connected to London by a high-speed rail link, a Crossrail extension and a six-lane motorway carving open the rural landscape. Parking stands for 300 aircraft would be attached to the terminal. To the west of the airport platform another 2,500 acres of farmland and marshes would be annexed for cargo facilities, while a further 544 acres would be asphalted for parking. Alongside the additional space given over to aircraft and maintenance hangars, inevitable infrastructure would spring up nearby – an 'Airport City' as it's referred to in the plan – including housing, shops, offices and hotels. Three entire villages would be lost for ever as a result, as well as over 4,000 acres of bird habitat, an area roughly two and a half times the size of Gibraltar and supposedly protected as SPA, SSSI and Ramsar sites. In their submission to the Airports Commission, Foster + Partners themselves admitted the following:

The large terminals and operational buildings, offices, roads and car parks will interrupt the broad open scale of the marsh landscape. The network of ditches and creeks will be destroyed under the footprint of the airport. The settings of historic buildings and structures adjacent to the airport will be dramatically changed, assuming that they are not removed. The low hills of the Hoo

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Peninsula rising out of the surrounding marshland will be lost entirely. The existing open views out over the estuary will be lost and replaced by terminal buildings, aircraft hangars and extensive areas of paving.

In order for a new hub airport to be viable, Heathrow, already Europe's busiest airport in terms of passenger numbers, would be closed and redeveloped. According to the proposal, Heathrow would be turned into a mixed housing and commercial zone which, in Foster + Partners' own words, would 'rival London Docklands', making the communities already dependent on Heathrow redundant in the process. In essence, then, the plan would be to shut down an operational airport near London, responsible for more than 200,000 jobs, either directly, indirectly or induced, many of them in relatively deprived boroughs, in order to build another airport on one of the last large-scale protected landscapes anywhere near the city.

The Hoo Peninsula is far from pristine; it's an area, like everywhere else in modern Britain, with a long and complex history of human use. Power stations and gas terminals anchor the Isle of Grain at the eastern end of the spur. The ruins of a nineteenth-century fort and a Second World War munitions testing zone are still visible, as is a radio transmitter station operational during the war. And at low tide one afternoon, I ran my hands along two steel launch rails that slid as smoothly as seals into the waters from the Brennan torpedo post that was embedded into the banks of the Thames in 1890 as part of Cliffe Fort. Yet each of these aspects of industrial or military use exists within the scale and span of the peninsula, a living landscape that continues to evolve within its physical parameters, comprising a mosaic of diverse pieces that

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never diminishes the foundational essence of the place itself. Slowly and surely over the centuries, the marsh country has absorbed them into its whole, a feat simply beyond its capacity when the latest proposal for the peninsula is an airport that would alter the geography to such a startling degree that a range of hills could 'be lost entirely'. The place would be gone in all but name.

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I walked out of Gravesend, sloping down a rain-slick street to find the Thames the colour of dusk when I reached it. The marshes of north Kent stretch unbroken from there all the way east to the village of Grain on the far side of the Hoo Peninsula. Long-maned horses grazed the slopes down to the river to a chorus of fizzing song: skylark, reed warbler and swift. The marsh grasses rippled with wind, fanning open like a spread deck of cards as I walked the open country. Ahead of me I could see how the land swung north with the river, the bend that lends the Kentish coast its spur. I felt something shift at that moment, a tingle across my skin. That simple curve of coast, marking the true beginning of the Hoo Peninsula, called out to me in the way that promontories often do. Unlike islands, separation and escape aren't part of a peninsula's allure; instead, they seem to stretch possibility itself, urging you on to their very end.

I bent into the wind, swifts scything low across the grasses. A shelduck skittered on its wings like they were hobbled legs, feigning injury to lure me away: at the marsh's edge, a bundle of her grey and nervous young. I reached the bend in the river where a pond held a drowned car, windowless and rusted. Behind it, on an islet of gravel and mud in the first of the large pools near the

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village of Cliffe, nested a colony of black-headed gulls. I watched a few of them lift from their birthing grounds to join the common terns that were tearing open the air, hawking high over the water. A dance of white wings unfolded above me, a graceful solidarity between species so near to the industrial trinity of Tilbury power station, the petrochemical plants of Canvey Island and the factories on the outskirts of Gravesend. I stopped to enjoy the spectacle, to watch the gulls and terns bleach the dark canopy of cloud. And perhaps I watched for just a little too long, for suddenly one of the gulls peeled away from the dance, turning sharply and sweeping down on me with a rattling screech, the avian equivalent of an air-raid siren. The gull arrowed close to my head, then curled upwards like a child being pushed higher on a playground swing before falling back again, glancing near on its second attempt.

The islet of nests and young hadn't seemed particularly close, but like so much about the living world, it's easy to misjudge distances and intentions, to see things solely on our own terms, failing to consider – both individually and collectively – the impact of our presence. As with the shelduck that had pretended to be injured when it saw me, I was simply too near to all that the black-headed gulls held dear, the colony of vulnerable young they were raising in a fragile corner of a compromised landscape. A tern joined the dive-bombing gull, sheering across the pool, tilting its long scimitar wings to dip low on its approach. I kept my head down and sprinted along the riverside track. Looking back from a safe distance, I saw the birds circling high above their citadel again.

At the western edge of the Hoo Peninsula, Cliffe Pools, which hold 10 per cent of the UK's entire assemblage of saline lagoon

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habitat, owe their existence to quarrying, to the clay-diggings and river-dredgings of a nineteenth-century cement industry that left behind large pits that eventually brimmed with rain. Gill had archive photographs of quarrymen watching swans and herons while the site was still active, the industry unintentionally providing a whole watery world for them. Acquired by the RSPB in 2001, the combination of saline lagoons, brackish pools, salt marsh and scrub is now ideal for a range of breeding and migratory species, and in 2014, thirty years after last successfully breeding in the UK, a pair of rare black-winged stilts raised young on the reserve. But that wasn't the bird I was seeking when the sun finally eclipsed the clouds, drenching the marshes in a spill of sudden light. I crept alongside a thicket of alders lining a lagoon, edging slowly around the corner, and there, sifting water through their distinctively upcurved bills, were a pair of gleaming avocets, their snow-white feathers inked with the black curves of an elegant calligraphy. There is no wader that I know of as exquisite as the avocet. I'm not sure whether my feelings for it are because of the startling, zebra-like shades, the refinement of its tapered black bill or the hypnotic head-shuffle it performs while feeding in water, a movement that Gill told me she thought of as 'belly dancing' whenever she saw it, but I'm certain that something of its resurrection story plays a role in my reckoning.

The avocet holds a special place in the bestiary of British species. Driven to national extinction in the nineteenth century through a combination of hunting, marsh drainage and the collecting of their eggs for food, the avocet was adopted to feature on the logo of the RSPB in 1955 as the emblem of the organization's cause, the need to protect and preserve the UK's wild and often imperilled birds. It was only after the marshy margins of

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eastern England experienced a period of relative quiet during the Second World War that the avocet returned, gradually building up its numbers and slowly expanding to occupy its former range, until the RSPB logo on which it still appears, seen on everything from books and binoculars to bird feeders and bumper stickers, began to represent more than just a single, once-vanished species but also the possibility of recovery, a symbol of hope amidst a dwindling register of wild animals. Some 1,500 pairs of avocets now breed in the UK, all beginning with the handful of birds that colonized the Suffolk coast in the spring of 1947.

I watched the pair on the Hoo Peninsula lift and land, then rise again over the lagoon, their almost translucent blue legs trailing like ropes in water. The pools at Cliffe now annually host around 150 pairs of breeding avocets, and it's an unrivalled roosting place in late summer, recording the highest single-site count of the species – 1,930 – anywhere in the UK. I watched the avocets drop from the sky, wondering what an airport would mean for these recent returnees, more than a quarter of the nation's entire population regularly utilizing the Thames Estuary in some way. Chalk-white with sunlight as they landed, the streaks of coal running through their feathers turned to dark commas on their collapsing wings.

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A poignant suite of graves huddles in the cemetery of St James', a graceful country church raised from flint and ragstone near the village of Cooling. The bundle of small stones, thirteen in all, marks the final resting place of the children of two local families, all but one of them less than nine months of age at the time of

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death. The markers have become known as Pip's Graves, fictionally memorialized in the opening scene of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* as the 'little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long', where Pip's five brothers are buried, nestled together beside those of his mother and father. It is thought that Dickens lowered the number of stones for reasons of believability, the real figure of dead infants they commemorated perhaps too difficult for his readers to accept.

'We want to preserve the Dickens landscape as well,' said Gill as we stepped away from the graves. 'Because of *Great Expectations* we say ours *is* the marsh country. We don't have the right to come along and destroy it.' The Hoo Peninsula is a landscape that the author often walked, particularly after moving to nearby Gad's Hill in Higham a decade before his death. His appetite for walking was prodigious, whether through London at night or the Kent countryside by day, and he regularly strode the five miles to the cemetery at St James' to picnic there beside the graves and an ancient yew. And it is there in the churchyard, with the 'dark flat wilderness' of the marsh country beyond it, 'intersected with dikes and mounds and gates', that the orphan Pip encounters Magwitch, who has escaped from one of the prison hulks that were anchored where the marshes join the Thames at Egypt Bay, a meeting that radically alters the destiny of one of the most celebrated characters in world literature. Other literary landscapes in Britain, such as the Yorkshire moorland near Haworth, where the Brontë sisters lived, wrote and sought inspiration, or the Lake District hills of the Romantic poets, are revered, but it seems that this one, like so many other wet and level landscapes, has for the most part been forgotten.

Gill was in her mid-sixties and tiny, her silver-haired head rising barely to my chest, but her age and diminutive size had

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absolutely no bearing on her spirit; if anything, they only seemed to amplify and enlarge it. She was a powerhouse of passion and empathic intelligence, and everyone I've introduced her to in the years since our first meeting has without exception come away feeling simultaneously inspired and energized by her presence, made to realize just how much determination a single individual can carry. Completely unknown to her, she had a way of passing her inner strength on to you, even if in private she sometimes betrayed an acute vulnerability that was premised on a singular sensitivity to the world about her. I've never met anyone who combines the qualities of compassion and consideration with such dogged persistence as her. She spent a significant portion of her time looking after her disabled adult son, and large parts of the rest immersing herself in the ecology of her beloved marshlands. Extremely knowledgeable about the wild creatures on her patch, she was absolutely committed to their survival. 'Wildlife can't speak for itself,' she once said as we walked the marshes, 'so when it comes to responding to governments, the people have to do the speaking for the wildlife and the landscape. The landscape can't say, *Excuse me. Here I am, I'm beautiful.* It can't do that.'

I looked out over the marshes from the churchyard. 'Some people say the area is bleak,' said George, 'but I think that bleak is beautiful.' There was a Turneresque quality to the landscape, that pale collapsing of horizons and sky, the billowing updraught of rapturous mists. 'It's a beauty all its own,' added Joan. Over the course of numerous visits, I learned just how varied the beauty of this landscape in the pull of the estuary could be. Some days were exquisitely bleak, a hazy and atmospheric expanse riven with the ghostly calls of invisible birds. But on others, the place would be burnished as though some promised land, a longed-for shore of glossy grasslands

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backed by a ridge of deep-green hills in their summer sheen. The landscape itself, and the quality of light I have experienced there, wouldn't have appeared so different to Charles Dickens on his walks, having been shaped by human hand since Roman times, veined with channels and riddled with dykes that sluice water away so that animals can safely graze the reclaimed pastures.

The reclamation of salt marsh behind sea walls on the peninsula, a process known as 'inning', can be traced back through historical records to at least the early twelfth century. And although I saw a different generation of vessels than Dickens would have while walking the marsh country – vast, metallic freighters with such names as *Vespertine*, *Grande Brasile* and *Maersk Laberinto* instead of wooden, tall-masted clippers and schooners – I witnessed the same optical illusion that he would have experienced, the sea wall hiding the river when you cross the flatlands, so that the ships, by some strange estuarine alchemy, appear to be gliding over the land like meadow-boats, afloat on a sea of rippled grass.

The river and its estuary provided sustenance, transport and opportunities to the peninsular communities that prayed in these marsh-country parishes. Inside the church of St James', as a pale mist of light seeped in through the windows, I opened a door in the south-facing wall to a small vestry. It took me some time to work out what I was looking at in the gloom, until my eyes slowly adjusted. Although the church itself dates from the late thirteenth century, the vestry is nineteenth century in origin, a tiny, easily overlooked nook with a solitary desk and pew. But what marks out the vestry as beautifully rare are the thousands of cockle shells that plaster the walls in their entirety, as if a simple mosaic, the harvest of the sea its sole motif.

The inscription made by the embedding of shells in a pattern

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above the door is difficult to decipher, but the date appears to read either 1833 or 1888. Either way, the choice of cockle shells to line the inside of the vestry was apt. Not only were they one of the primary food sources gathered from the estuary, but the scallop shape is also the emblem of St James the Great, the patron saint of the church. Medieval pilgrims on the Way of St James carried a scallop shell as they walked to the apostle's shrine at Santiago de Compostela, showing it at churches, abbeys and houses along the route, where it would be filled with a charitable scoop of food or drink to sustain them on their long and arduous journeys. I ran my hands over the shells, some rubbed as smooth as a sea-washed stone, others crisply ridged with a pattern of grey waves. Together they told a story of belonging, the visible braids of a lived and anchored life, land and sea and place made one.

Standing in the way of the proposed airport are beautiful churches in the villages of Allhallows and Grain, dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively, and the Foster + Partners' proposal states that any listed buildings will be reinstated elsewhere, 'should their significance warrant translocation'. The physicality of a church, however, the particular blend of beams, stones, arches and stained glass that lend it its architectural elegance, is merely one aspect of its overall significance. What can never be relocated, nor even measured, is its accrued meaning: the centuries of song that have been sung inside its walls; the murmured prayers and whispers of worship. Neither can the unique moments that have unfolded there be moved, all the weddings, baptisms and goodbyes, experiences given depth by Solnit's 'internal compass and map made by memory and spatial awareness together'. For the meanings of our relationships with the built and natural environment – their resonance echoed in that

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dense embedding of cockle shells – are inseparable from the places they were forged in.

Walking away from St James', snow flickering past us as we left behind the children's graves, Gill said, 'What's particularly strong is the sense of community spirit in these villages, and we don't think anyone has the right to destroy it.' Along with the churches, villagers in the doomed settlements would be rehoused in other parts of Kent, severing their physical and emotional ties to this place. 'Where could you put people where they could have their extended families near them and where they would be surrounded by wildlife?' asked Gill. 'It would be impossible to recreate this community.'

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It's exhilarating out on the marshes, within earshot of the rising river. The wild estuary light continually shifts, filtered through salt air and sea-funnelled clouds, so that the mood of any moment can twist and turn, as sinuous as the peninsula's creeks. The wind pours in from the north or rides up the Thames on the tide, like the centuries of ships that have followed its promised course. And when the sun burns like a hot coin in the saddle of the sky, the marshes dance with a hazy shimmer, rolling towards the river, a green prairie slanting to the sea.

These wide open spaces lend the peninsula its particular and distinctive appeal – the way the sky over the estuary seems uncommonly deep, the way the drawl of a river boat, or the call of curlews arching high overhead, is gathered up by the air and held there for longer than usual, so that the sound sifts down, as lightly as snow. Together these expanses encourage a corresponding openness within; they leave space for weather and light, all the

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tangible atmospheres of our living, breathing world. To be out there on the peninsula, at the edge of the spangled sea, can be as liberating as it gets in a landscape.

But what value do these qualities of place carry in this age? What credence is given to open skies, to the ability to experience a place that hasn't been turned entirely to our own convenience? In a statement to support the submission of Foster + Partners' proposal to the Airports Commission, Sir Norman Foster said that 'we have reached a point where we must act, in the tradition of those Victorian forebears and create afresh – to invest now and safeguard future generations. Why should we fall behind when we could secure a competitive edge?'

The airport proposal would have us believe that their plan is radical and brave. Yet little has changed since the Victorian age they evoke; our approach to economic growth has long been premised on extraction and building, to level and reshape on a vast scale in order to spur and stimulate fiscal activity. Whether it's skyscrapers, motorways or airports, large-scale building is the status quo, and Foster + Partners' plan merely follows that well-trodden route, breaking yet more new ground with old ideas. While they insist that their proposal is a way to 'safeguard future generations', the obvious question in reply is, What will be safeguarded for them?

'What kind of world are we going to leave to our children and grandchildren in the future?' asked Gill. 'We can't destroy absolutely everything.' Given how global firms increasingly feel they can get away with the development of unique and protected landscapes – and with governments steadily more content to grant them their wishes – what of the world will be left for those future generations to cherish other than a 'competitive edge'? Those Victorian forebears of ours that Sir Norman Foster extols were equally

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well known for their enthusiasm for empire, and perhaps that is a more accurate comparison: a misplaced sense of rightful dominion over local communities, landscapes and wildlife. Reading their proposal in the same year that the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its most comprehensive findings to date, stating that 'unequivocal' global warming 'threatens our planet, our only home', a plan to build Europe's largest airport from scratch seems to have very little to do with safeguarding anyone's future.

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Standing off the coast of the Isle of Grain, the London Stone at Yantlet Creek had intrigued me from the moment I first saw it. It was one of two evocative boundary markers on the Thames that once delineated the eastern jurisdiction of the City of London. The stone pillar rises where the river meets the sea on the rim of the peninsula, exposed on the shining mudflats when the Thames retreats. But having little experience of the tides that envelop the estuary, and even less knowledge about the strange alchemy of silt stirred with water, I had no plan to cross the riverbed to reach it.

The tide was out as I curved along the sea wall from the village of Allhallows, revealing a palette of worn browns and rinsed blues where the river had run. Sandy mud was ridged into the shape of the vanished waves. Seaweed slicked the shore, dark and glistening. The clouds in the wide estuary skies were in spate, streaming out to sea with a violent westerly. With each step the stone obelisk rose more clearly into view, far out and solitary on a midden of crusted rocks. I knew then, seeing it isolated by tides and exposed to the winds and rain that stampede across the estuary, that all my earlier intentions had been suspended. I suddenly wanted to be in

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its presence, near the barnacled base that has held it steady through nearly two centuries of swirling currents. I wanted to stand in the sway of the emptying river.

What is it that forges these connections, these strong allegiances that emerge between people and place? In response to such compelling resonances, the Czech author Václav Cílek has suggested that ‘a place within a landscape corresponds to a place within the heart’. Having spent considerable time with Gill, Joan and George on the Hoo Peninsula, I could clearly understand the indelible ties and tetherings between their lives and this expansive terrain. They were linked to it in multiple ways, rooted by the human compulsion to seek meaning in the physical world, whether through the embrace of entire topographies or the cherishing of small and knowable local spots. For we each have our own resonances that chime inside us. As far back as I can remember I’ve been drawn to stones; whether set on a bleak, storm-weathered dale or in a green-leafed glade, they’ve spoken to me in the same way as stories. Like paths that have radiated and been remade across the land for millennia, they express meaning that is native to the places they are found in. Some of the commonest stones have been guides to a territory, set as navigational signs to preserve a sequence of safe steps across moorland or marsh, marking a way for the solitary traveller, or tributaries of trade. Unlike the formal monoliths raised to commemorate empire and victory, the stones discovered along the edges of rivers and fields speak a more vernacular tongue. They are ancestral and confiding, bequeathing to us patterns of past use.

The water in Yantlet Creek was trickling out to sea when I reached it, like sand in an hourglass. I knew that I needed to be quick, unsure how swiftly the tide might surge when it turned. The slippery sides of the hollow creek were shiny with mud and my

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first step nearly sent me spilling down the slope. Finally I found a litter of crushed bricks that led to a narrow waist of water, where a few rocks had been tipped into the stream as a makeshift bridge. When I hit the beach on the far side the clouds were suddenly flung open like curtains, revealing the sun in a window of sky. In the hot white light, Shelley's 'lone and level sands' stretched away, a mire of tidal flats that touched the distant, silvering sea.

Even in the knowledge that place is a physical space or environment that's been claimed by feelings, Gussow's definition provides merely the most basic of scaffolds upon which our relationships can be raised. For wherever in the world it is found, place is composite in the extreme. It's woven through a combination of weather, seasons, shared experiences and livelihoods. It's assembled from architectures and underlying geologies, the flush of spring wildflowers and the sounds of city streets. It's composed of traditions and temperatures, wind patterns and topographies. It's shaped by animal paths and the whirl of a bird's wings. And it's worn and deeply scored with communal histories, songs and stories that correspond to some region of the human heart.

I crunched over a reef of countless sea creatures, their shells as bright as cleaned bone. Large freighters slid into the distance, surrounded by a shimmering haze that made them appear to float through air. I walked fast along the beach and, finally, out onto the riverbed, stepping slowly across a watery glaze that was pitted with black rocks. Nearly at the stone, the sands started to give way, parting with each step so that my boots vanished into the sudden, deepening folds. I turned back to shore, eyeing the elusive stone column that stood sentinel off the coast. Working my way around the headland I eventually found a path, a causeway of small rocks and clinker laid down over the years, which led me across the sinking sands.

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The London Stone marks a place first measured out by the charter of King Edward I in 1285. Standing 33.5 miles from London Bridge, the stone – linked by the invisible Yantlet Line to the Crowstone at Chalkwell, on the north side of the river – once marked the extent of fishing rights on the lower Thames, which had been the exclusive preserve of the Crown until 1197, when King Richard I sold them to the City of London in order to finance massive debts incurred by his involvement in the Third Crusade. Although the obelisk itself is Victorian in origin, it's probable that a marker of some kind has existed at this same site for the past seven centuries.

To stand beside the London Stone was to open the old river to view. I was able to envisage those countless other correspondences that have left their traces across the threatened peninsula. One of the beauties of place is that it has the ability to imprint itself upon us in an instant. Many will have known that immediate, electrifying symmetry upon arriving somewhere that seems to fit so perfectly with your life as to be predetermined, the place you were always meant to find. And that connection, embryonic and swollen with possibilities, can begin with something as simple as a stone. The markers of a landscape act as folk memories, reminders of the ways of life that governed the age of their making, from the histories of dockers and lightermen crisscrossing the Thames to the bootleggers and fugitives that hid in the marshes alongside it. This silted curve of coast has steered generations of men and women out to sea, or returned them at journey's end, and this column, caught up in the tangle of salt water and fresh, seemed to speak for them all.

I reached up and pressed my palms against the weathered stone, where other hands had held it to shape and raise it tall, before I headed for the shore. I followed the watery path that my feet had dimpled across the sands and safely recrossed the creek.

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When I turned for a last look, the clouds had settled heavily over the estuary, lending an altogether different, more brooding aspect to the scene. For all the complexity of place – the compound aggregate of countless particularities that resonate and shimmer inside us – it can be radically altered by something as simple as a shift in the angle of light. At any moment it's remade.

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'They can talk about community,' said Gill as a tin of cake and biscuits was being passed around the table, 'but the government thinks it can pick us up, bricks and mortar, and move us somewhere else. But community's not like that, because a place is inside you. A place is in here.' She tapped at her heart as she spoke.

We were still discussing the airport proposal – the serious risk of bird strikes in the estuary, the prevalence of dangerous fog – but had moved on to more personal things as well. George talked a little about managing his son's wedding band and his love of motorcycle touring. Gill spoke about her volunteer work at St Helen's church and organizing village fêtes and heritage events for the community. And Joan, who juggled a busy set of commitments between her obligations as a parish councillor and airport campaigner with her full-time work in the Rochester office of her family's custom car bodywork business, told me the story of turning up years ago for her first walk across the marshes wearing high heels and fancy trousers totally unsuitable for the wet and muddy terrain, laughing at how naïve and unprepared she was all that time ago. The three of them had been brought together by their love of this place, each of them, in their own personal and particular ways, coming to make connections within a wider landscape they were a

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part of. None of them were biologists, environmental scientists or legal experts. Instead their endeavours were, at their very heart, about protecting a sense of home in its widest and most inclusive of meanings, grasping how it radiates outwards like the spokes of a wheel from its central hub. The airport proposal focuses much of its energy on the importance of hubs, intoning the need for greater connectivity in a globalized age. And yet you could speak to any one of the Friends of the North Kent Marshes, or the many other residents I've met during my time there, and see how connectivity is already well established on the Hoo Peninsula.

'At sunset, in summer, the air turns pink with the glowing, and the white egrets actually turn pink as well, which is absolutely magical,' said Joan as we finished up our tea. 'One day I walked up to the viewpoint on my own and just looked at the landscape. It was stunning – it was so beautiful, all the wildlife, the birds. It actually brought a tear to me. And I just thought, *It cannot be destroyed. It just can't.*'

I had only ever planned on spending a single day on the peninsula, sufficient time to meet these campaigners and learn enough about their home potentially to write an article about its predicament, but sometimes a place finds its way unexpectedly inside you, holding fast to some ineffable interior, so that it leads you back again and again. On each of my subsequent visits I encountered richness wherever I went, each step bringing some new quality of the marsh country into focus. Yet with it came a simultaneous disquiet: the knowledge of its fragility. Avocets swept across the shingle like a sudden squall of snow in the place where aircraft would descend; water-light, that gleaming meld of sea and sky, spilled over the marshes where terminal buildings would loom; and a barrage of peeping redshanks fired from the marsh grasses where the impermeable surface of a car park would be

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laid. Even the long-standing London Stone, after surviving centuries of storms and tides, would be swept away by the airport.

I climbed through soft rain one day to reach the spine of the peninsula. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon and mid-June, not far off the longest day, but already it was darkening all around me. It was soon about to pour. As I looked from the crest of the low ridge, I suddenly had a clear sense of where I was; not because I was nearing the end of my day's journey, but because from that humble height I could see both rivers, silvering to either side of me. While I'd spent hours poring over a map of the area when I was first getting to know it, trying to divine some sense of the place from a flat representation that I'd kept folded in my rucksack, I could now see clearly before me how the spur of the peninsula rode into the estuary, tapering into the tide like a creature of the sea. That ancient name for the Hoo Peninsula was no longer abstract but experienced.

I peered through falling rain to see three egrets stitch a white weave into the dark sky, and I began to wonder if that was how the Hoo Peninsula was perceived by those who wished to level the hill that I stood on – the way that it appears on a map, empty of all that it holds, a flat and featureless quarter slotted between London and the sea. Just a litter of marsh names that confirm, for some, its sour insignificance: Whalebone Marshes, Cooling Marshes, St Mary's Marshes, Allhallows Marshes. But what is a map, any map, however subtle its scale, to the song of the skylark? What is a map to the arc of the avocet, that slow flight back from extinction to survival? What is a smooth sheet of paper to the centuries of evensong sung in peninsular churches, to the thousands of cockle shells embedded in their walls? What is a map to the murmur of the rising tide, to those three white egrets, aglow in the pewter sky?

All that I'd walked across that day would be gone, either

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physically destroyed or irreversibly lessened to such a degree by the constant noise and industrial processes of a twenty-four-hour airport and its attendant infrastructure that it would amount to the same thing: the complete obliteration of a place and its communities. And while standing on that hill that would be razed I remembered Gill's words from the morning I first met her: 'We're just custodians of the world, that's all.' Peering across villages that had endured in the marsh country for centuries, I struggled to fathom the sheer scale of it all; not of the airport, but of the blindness, vanity and loss.

Although the Airports Commission eventually rejected the Thames Estuary proposal from Foster + Partners in September 2014, having conducted a feasibility study that raised serious concerns about its enormous cost, viability and impacts, relief was tempered by experience on the Hoo Peninsula. 'We're pleased that Howard Davies saw this idea for what it is, a huge environmental, economic and social mistake, but we've been here before,' said Joan, remembering how an airport at Cliffe was ruled out in 2003. This most recent decision was non-binding, and Boris Johnson immediately went on to dismiss the commission as 'irrelevant' and its ruling against his pet project as 'myopic'. He was so committed to the idea that, while still mayor, he refused to amend his London Infrastructure Plan 2050, in which the airport features heavily, even after the decision by the commission was announced. And so the threat, while pushed back out to sea for the time being, awaits only a favourable wind to come ashore again. And if it does, there'll be a formidable resistance to greet it. 'I have no money, but I'll give all my time and energy to protect our places,' said Gill as we sat at a table in St Helen's one morning. 'Don't destroy everything we love and care about and expect us to live with it.'